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ABSTRACT

Sections 51215-51217 of California's Educational Code require that school districts in that state provide remedial instruction to students who do not pass district-developed proficiency tests. As a result of this requirement, school districts have had to create remedial courses for some 100,000 students who did not pass one or more tests in reading, writing, and arithmetic. This meant that more than 4,000 remedial classes at a cost of approximately 12 million dollars had to be offered to 30% of the students. English and mathematics teachers who had been teaching electives and advanced courses for college preparatory students found themselves reassigned to teaching proficiency classes. School districts also used funds to offer proficiency classes in summer school. Educators have begun to worry that this will lead to the trivialization of the high school curriculum without significantly improving the performance of the remedial students, since no evidence has yet been produced showing that remedial classes are more effective than regular classes in improving students' abilities. Faced with these problems, school boards need to reconsider their proficiency testing programs by asking the state to determine what minimal competency is in the adult community and by making sure that the content and processes assessed by their tests represent parts of the curriculum actually taught in their schools. (FL)

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# The Great Educational Earthquake of 1981: Reallocation of Resources in California High Schools to Meet Minimal Competency Requirements: Was the Reallocation Necessary?

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# The Great Educational Earthquake of 1981: Reallocation of Resources in California High Schools to Meet Minimal Competency Requirements: Was the Reallocation Necessary?

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The great educational earthquake of 1981 resulted in a rapid reallocation of resources at the high school level. This reallocation occurred to meet the educational requirements of some 100,000 students, about 30 percent of the tenth-grade class, who did not pass one or more proficiency tests in reading, writing, and arithmetic. These students then signed up in 1980-81 for one or more remedial courses in mathematics and English.[1]

## Cost of the Reallocation of Resources

Simple arithmetic will show the magnitude of resources required to staff the courses which had to be offered in order to meet the Educational Code requirements (Sections 51215-17) that went into effect in 1977. The Code requires school districts to provide remedial courses for students who do not pass the district's proficiency tests. We know the 100,000 students took at least one remedial course. If we assume the 25 students are enrolled in a remedial class, then 4,000 remedial classes had to be offered to educate the 30 percent of the students who failed on one or more of the proficiency tests given in the tenth grade in 1979-80. If we further assume that five classes is a normal teaching load, then 800 full-time equivalent teachers taught these classes. If we also assume that these teachers each earn a salary of $15,000 per year, then the cost of the

instruction is 800 x $15,000, which equals $12,000,000. (That is almost as much money as California allocates from the general fund for all textbooks in grades K-4.) Because the State of California did not provide high schools with any additional funds for this instruction, school districts could only meet the new Educational Code requirement by taking instructional resources from the upper 70 percent of the students, those who had passed all the proficiency tests, and shifting them to the lower 30 percent of the students. English and mathematics teachers who had been teaching electives and advanced courses for college preparatory students found that they had to be reassigned to teaching proficiency classes. School districts also used funds to offer proficiency classes in summer school.

Trivialization of the Curriculum

Although no survey has yet been made on the effects that this great allocation of resources is having on faculty and students, the State Department of Education feared the potential impact would be "trivialization" of the high school curriculum.[2] We can define a trivial curriculum as one that does not add much to a student's general achievement. Another definition is that it is a curriculum without electives in fine arts or advanced courses in academic subjects. A trivial curriculum may adversely affect the school's achievement level in basic skills by not only eliminating the challenging advanced courses, but also by narrowing the curriculum.

To improve the average achievement of its students, a school ideally should increase the scores of all its students. However, students at the extremes of achievement affect the average level of achievement the most. Those at the lower end pull it down, those at the upper level lift it up.

Since students at the upper level tend to gain the most from instruction, school districts which want to improve results on such standardized tests as the California Assessment Program, the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, or the Iowa Tests of Educational Development should offer advanced courses to their students at the upper end of the achievement level to provide the necessary lift to the school's average level of achievement on standardized tests. But, if the school does not offer these students advanced courses, then it tends to preclude one way of improving the school's standing in achievement on standardized tests. In shifting resources from the upper 70 percent to the lower 30 percent, high schools are in effect robbing "Peter to pay Paul" and are thus operating on a myopic policy.

Impact of Remedial Courses

Nor are the schools necessarily benefiting the lower third by offering remedial courses. The institution of remedial courses in math and English reinstitutes a kind of tracking system in the high school. This system of grouping students for instruction was outlawed in Hobson vs. Hansen.[3] Ever since, high schools have allowed their students to select their own classes instead of having counselors program and assign them to classes based on their general mental ability or their general levels of achievement. Full tracking has not returned because counselors do not assign students to remedial courses, but students feel they must take these courses. This option takes them out of regular classes and puts them into special classes. These remedial classes run counter to the spirit of Public Law 94-142, which was formulated for special education, but its philosophy also applies

to low achieving students. PL 94-142 specifies that students in special education should be placed in the least restrictive educational environment. In other words, if students do not improve in basic skills and do not pass their proficiency tests by graduation time, they also suffer another stigma: they do not get a diploma at their high school commencement. Some school districts even bar them from participating in commencement exercises. The students are then not legally eligible for any position which requires a diploma. So, students feel compelled to sign up for remedial classes and suffer the stigma of being in classes segregated from the upper 70 percent of the high school students. Many of these segregated students are Black and Chicano. After all the efforts to integrate students, proficiency testing and remedial classes that accompany them are resegregating these students.

No evidence is available yet on the effects of remedial classes. That is, no knowledge has been provided that remedial classes are any more effective than regular English classes in improving students' reading and writing ability.

Instruction in Remedial Classes

We do know that the competency law did not provide any staff development funds for inservice education of teachers. Consequently, teachers did not go through any special training program to prepare for teaching the remedial courses. These teachers are probably unaware that students in these classes may fall into 10 diagnostic categories, with students in each category needing appropriate instruction. Teachers of the remedial classes may elect to offer a form of "individualized instruction" which is the poorest

kind of instruction: no instruction. This type of instruction consists of dittoed assignments, like workbook exercises, which give students written directions and then a set of problems to do. However, the teacher offers the students little or no instruction. Indeed, with 25 students in various assignments to be done during a 50-minute period, the teacher who is administering the "individualized instruction" only has two minutes per student, which is hardly enough time for adequate instruction for each student. Essentially, this instructional program is misnamed. It is not individualized instruction; instead, it is "bootstrap instruction" in which students must lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. That is, they must learn on their own from the dittoed assignments. They must read to find out what to do, try to do it, and if they make an error, diagnose the error themselves and correct it.

In contrast, it is possible to train teachers who could offer a more appropriate type of course. These teachers could not only diagnose and group students for needed instruction, but use a variety of input instruction. For example, in one type of input instruction, the teacher would start a lesson by explaining and demonstrating how to do a new exercise or a problem, then call upon students to see if they understand the new instruction, and finally, when the teacher is satisfied students understand, only then assigning practice problems in the text, workbook, or dittoed exercise sheets! They could also use teaching strategies for all the students in the class, including a directed reading activity,[4] reading guides,[5] and reading acquisition in content materials.[6] These strategies also enable teachers to instruct all students in regular content area classes who are beyond the elementary stage of reading acquisition.[7,8]

Through such instruction, teachers may be able to help all students improve in their basic skills enough to pass the school's proficiency tests. Moreover, these classes would not stigmatize and segregate students, nor would they soften the curriculum. Whether this approach results not only in improvement on proficiency tests but also on achievement in basic skills, we know that these classes will not require reallocation of resources, but only training of teachers in strategies to handle a wide range of individual differences in achievement.

Normal Range of Achievement

The normal range of individual student differences at the tenth-grade level consists at one extreme of students whose reading ability is fifth-grade level in general reading ability, and at the other extreme students whose general reading ability is comparable to the average level of reading ability of a second-year college student.[9] This range of ability occurs when all students are achieving up to the limits of their general mental ability.

Only recently have high school teachers had this full range of reading abilities in their classrooms. In the 1950's only 55 percent of the students in the ninth grade remained through high school. In the 1970's this figure had increased to 85 percent.[10] Consequently, high schools during the first part of the century were highly selective institutions. Many students in the early 1900's thought their education was complete at the end of the sixth or eighth grade, In fact, the junior high school was created to serve as a transitional unit that would encourage students to go on to high school, particularly students with high achievement. Those

with low achievement continued to drop out and enter the job market. Gradually, the holding power of the high school climbed and had a dramatic spurt in the 1960's and 1970's. But high school teachers were unprepared to teach students with such a wide range of abilities. In self-defense, they tended to voice the opinion that elementary and junior high schools should have brought all these students up to grade level before they reached high school.[11] But the concept of grade level represents an average; by definition, 50 percent of the students will be below average and 50 percent will be above. What the high school teachers meant is that only the upper 50 percent of the junior high school graduates should go on to high school.

The proficiency test is in effect a movement in this direction. Perhaps this movement was not intended by those who favored the establishment of the minimal competency law, such as legislators Hart and McAllister, and minority group leaders. Their intention may have been to reallocate school resources for low achievers and hold schools accountable for instructing them, not just promoting them regardless of level of achievement as schools had been doing under the social promotion policy in effect since the 1950's.[12] Others may simply want the high school diploma to certify that recipients have a minimal competency in basic skills.

Legal Requirements for Proficiency Tests

However, the law does not require schools to use a proficiency test as a screening device for high school students. Indeed, California's minimal competency law, in contrast with New York's, allows each school district to select or construct its own competency test and determine its

own score for passing the test. Under the law, California's State Board of Education may only furnish guidelines and examples for proficiency tests. In fact, the law (AB 65) expressly forbids the State Department of Education from contructing and administering a proficiency test. Therefore, instead of the State Department of Education and ultimately legislators having the responsibility for the proficiency test and its consequences, the legislature passed the responsibility on to the local school districts. In contrast, the New York State legislature authorized one state proficiency test and the same passing score for all students; hence the New York legislators take responsibility for the validity of the test, establishing the passing score for the proficiency test, and for assuring the public that all students in New York State who have been awarded a high school diploma have attained or excelled the same minimal level of competency. In contrast, a wide variety of tests were selected or constructed in California. Some 22 percent of the school districts in California selected a proficiency test, such as the Educational Testing Service's or McGraw-Hill Publishing Company's SHARF Test (constructed and developed by the Los Angeles Unified School District) or else used a commercial pool of items to construct a test. The commercial tests have about an eighth- or ninth-grade level of difficulty.[13] Their cutting score is set at a level where only 70 percent of the ninth graders pass the test. School districts which use these or comparable tests must then provide remedial courses for the students who fail one or more sections of the test. To do so, high school resources must be reallocated.

Although our society has not had a consensus on a standard for literacy, we have had some rules-of-thumb. The U.S. Bureau of Census uses as its

criterion of literacy completion of the sixth grade or only a positive answer to the question of whether a person has the ability to read and write a simple message in any language.[14] But school boards which have adopted an eighth- or ninth-grade level of difficulty for a test and a passing score of the 10th percentile or higher have raised, perhaps inadvertently, the minimal standard for literacy to a much higher level, higher than it has been in any society at any time! When viewed from an historical perspective, the change is dramatic. In England and France over 200 years ago, a person only had to read and write his or her own name to be considered literate.[15] In the United States 20 percent of the citizens could not reach this criterion in 1870. By 1978, less than one percent of citizens 14 years or older were illiterate according to the same criterion.[16] But with the advent of the new standard for minimal competency in basic skills, those students who do not pass the proficiency test are now deemed to be illiterate until they do pass it.

The new standard for literacy involves for the first time (1) in most states, a formal test of literacy, and (2) for the general public, a change in the criterion of literacy from only the ability to read familiar material aloud to an examiner's satisfaction, or attendance at school for six years or more, or an affirmative response to an inquiry on whether a person knows how to read and write a simple message to a criterion of demonstrated ability to understand an unfamiliar text and use that information in new situations.[17] In California, the number of tenth graders who are illiterate according to the new criterion is 30 percent. We do not yet know how many of them will pass by the twelfth grade, but we do know that considerable resources are being reallocated and marshalled

during the academic year and particularly in summer session classes to help them reach the new level of literacy. Only now are we beginning to realize the consequences and costs of adopting a minimum competency test. Thus, without conscious intent, our society has raised the minimal standard for literacy by two or three grade levels.

Of course, not all school districts set the minimal competency at such a high level. One school district established minimal competency at the sixth-grade level. At this level, the students have learned to read the words they hear in everyday life, write sentences for language use in ordinary conversation, and do all basic arithmetic computations. Those students who do not pass this level of proficiency can take additional courses at the junior high school and can probably pass the test before they reach high school. Consequently, this school district's high school will not have to shift instructional resources to the lower 30 percent by setting up remedial courses; it will not have to develop a quasi-tracking program, resegregate students, stigmatize them, and deny anyone who completes high school from receiving a diploma. Nor will its students want to drop out of school rather than face embarrassment at graduation.

Effects of High Minimal Competency Standards

Why did other school districts adopt a higher level of achievement? Probably the reasons are multiple. Some districts may have opted for reallocation of resources as a way of improving the minimal competency of their students in the interest of social justice and equality of opportunity. Other school districts may have confused minimal competency with minimal requirements for high school graduation and in so doing, established proficiency tests and standards for passing them at a relatively high level. One superintendent reported his Lions Club found his school

district's proficiency test had some embarrassingly difficult questions when he asked them to examine the test during a luncheon talk.

No school district has made any study to determine what adults have to know and be able to do in reading, writing, and arithmetic to be minimally competent! However, other agencies have produced some information on literacy; for example, we have some knowledge of the literacy requirements for Army jobs and for a wide variety of other occupations.[18,19] But we recognize that determination of literacy or minimal competency in reading is a complex issue. It involves not only the reading ability required for a particular job but also characteristics within the reader and the reading task, such as the aspirations of the reader to read certain types of material (e.g., high school or college level, literary and technical) and variations in the readability of the material.[20] Indeed, readability involves an interaction between the resources within the reader (prior knowledge, reasoning capacities, vocabulary ability, desire to know and understand),[21] and properties of the text.[22]

Despite the complexities involved in determining minimal competency and lack of evidence on it, school districts have nevertheless adopted or selected proficiency tests that are irreversibly affecting the certification of an estimated seven percent of California high school seniors. These seniors, some 21,000 students, were not expected to receive a diploma in 1981.[23] Yet the Harris survey of literacy indicated only one percent of the 16-year-old students across the nation were illiterate; correctly answer questions of Harris's life-skill type of reading materials.[24] This finding suggests that high school proficiency tests are more difficult than the Harris materials.

School Board Concerns

A study of minimal adult competency is necessary before schools can justify the validity of their proficiency tests. When certification is the issue, then courts will eventually decide whether the legal rights of students denied a high school diploma have been violated.[25] In anticipation of this consequence, school boards would be wise to ask their directors of research and evaluation to determine the reliability and validity of their proficiency tests. They should specifically determine whether the tests have curricular and instructional validity; that is, whether the test's objectives are part of the curriculum and whether the contents and processes assessed on the test are actually taught in the classroom. Otherwise, school boards may find themselves in court defending themselves from suits brought by students denied a high school diploma.

School boards also have to be concerned lest students and parents in the upper 70 percent react negatively to the reallocation of resources. The Educational Code requires high schools to prepare students for entry to colleges and universities. We already know that California students take fewer academic courses, for less time, get higher grades, and expect more advanced placement at the colleges and universities they plan to enter than do students throughout the nation who take the College Board Examination.[26] When California students enter colleges and universities, they are not only likely to find they do not get advanced placement, but also do not earn as high grades. This shock will occur particularly for those students who enter colleges and universities outside of California. Colleges and universities in California have already expressed concern about the drop in high school achievement.[27] Indeed, the legislature should assess the adequacy of the high school's college and university preparatory

program and monitor whether achievement in it is dropping, particularly in the subjects required for admission to the University of California. If so, then it will have to eventually deal with the issue that schools are not preparing their academically talented youth adequately for society's future needs.

What should board members do? The most obvious solution is to reconsider their district's proficiency test. They can also ask the legislature to fund a study to determine what minimal competency is in the adult community. Until the legislature acts, school boards can establish minimal competency at a level where 70 percent of the sixth-grade class can pass the proficiency test. School boards should also make sure that the content and processes assessed on the test represent samples of the curriculum that are actually taught in the classroom. If school boards adopt this strategy, then we can expect quick recovery from the great educational earthquake of 1981. If they do not act, then the aftershocks are likely to continue for some time.

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